

# BOOK FESTIVAL AND OTHER STORIES

by  
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## **The Days When Papa Takes Me to War**

By Rahul Kanakia

The soft buzz of a distant plane silences the cardroom. Although we've heard no cries of alarm, the men cock their heads and prepare themselves to die: according to Papa, war makes death come quickly and for no reason and that is why soldiers are scared all the time. That seems sad to me. Soldiers should be happy to die for their queen.

After the plane goes away, conversation revs up and then sputters silent like the motor of Papa's jeep. Then it revs again and the words catch and fast chatter fills the cardroom. I am in a world of frenzied giants: humans in muddy uniforms, with hairy faces and rifles that never leave their sides. Though they are male, they are clearly more like soldiers than drones.

In my world, I am the giant. No one down under the ground is bigger than me—no one except Papa. But here I am nothing, just a half-grown girl in a woolen dress. A few of the human queens have tried to touch me and sing to me, but I've pulled away. I know who my queen is, and I will not let a rival coat me with her musk.

Mama is all-powerful. Even in this impossibly distant place, I can sometimes catch the faintest wisp of her smell.

Papa downs the rest of his whiskey in one gulp. When he slams the glass onto the table, a cheer goes up from the men who surround us. Papa looks healthier than he usually does. His face is flushed red and his movements lack their usual herky-jerkiness.

A line of ants crawls out of his ear and makes its slow way down, through the line of his big, bushy beard and under his shirt.

I stand up high on the tips of my toes and whisper to them, in our language, "No, don't come outside. Not here. Papa needs to look good for his people."

Most of them break and scurry back into his ear. But one ant says, "Princess, the tunnels within this man are clogged up and overflowing. Millions starve in the legs while, to the north, backed-up food rots away at the peripheries of the intestines. We simply thought to make an end run around the—"

I crush the dissenting worker between two fingers. Papa laughs and says, "What are you picking at, Olivia?" He transfers his cards from one hand to the other and then puts it around me. When Papa moves, the men around us shift their stances. They want to see him play, but I can tell that they fear being touched by him. This is wise. If they fall any further under his sway, his musk will coat them and their fellow workers will no longer recognize them.

"I want to go home, Papa," I say.

He laughs. "Don't worry," he says. "We'll be home soon. I just came to see whether we've whipped those Krauts yet."

Then he is distracted by a soldier who darts out of the crowd with a dirty copy of a book that Papa wrote after fighting in a different war: one that happened a long time ago. Papa slaps the soldier on the back and signs the front of the book.

Ever since I can remember, Papa has told me about the war that is currently raging amongst his people. But whenever I heard him say that he *needed* to go outside and find out what was happening to his boys, I thought he needed to find it out in the

same impossible way that I needed to find out how deep the tunnels went or what made food taste so good after it was regurgitated. But no. He meant something different. He always does.

Mama tried to tell him that he belongs to us now, and that our people do not have a side; for thousands of lifetimes, we've kept ourselves aloof from mankind's horrible wars. But then Papa told Mama that if a bad man named Hitler was allowed to beat Papa's side, then it wouldn't be long before Hitler filled the world with a poison gas that would choke up and destroy all of our people.

I did not want to come, but Mama forced me to. She said that the ants inside Papa would refuse to work unless a member of the royal family was there to guide them.

He gathers me forward with his arm and catches the eyes of the soldiers. They all love him. Papa is a journalist, but everyone wishes that he was a soldier.

"My darling girl," Papa says. "Olivia's just eleven...." The soldiers chuckle at the joke that they do not know is a joke. Actually, I was hatched eleven weeks ago.

"God, she's no bigger than my nine year old," says one of the soldiers.

Papa shakes his head. "Her mother was...she was a singer." He gives them a faraway smile. "I met her before the war. But not much call for singing nowadays. And what with the shortages...things haven't been too easy for Olivia. Her mother...well, we all have to go down under the ground eventually." I feel the humor almost shaking loose inside him.

"Mama enjoys being underground," I say. "But Papa hates it."

One of the soldiers looks down at me with wet eyes. His hand twitches towards me and then goes still.

Papa claps a hand onto my shoulder. "But now that Olivia's come into my care, I'm gonna make sure she gets fed up right."

"When your convoy didn't return, we thought you must be dead," says the oldest soldier at the table. "The newspapers even published your obit."

Papa's face loses its smile. "The Krauts hit the convoy. One of our boys held out for three hours, sniping them from under the truck, but it wasn't enough. I took three bullets, and limped off into the fields to die.. Eventually, I collapsed in a vineyard and let my blood mingle with the soil. But the woman who owned the winery stumbled upon my body and cared for me. I spent the spring and summer hiding in the cave where she used to age her champagne. I shouldn't have survived that day."

His body still wants to die. It is only kept alive by a million ants laboring inside him. When he gesticulates, I can see the flash of black under his shirt where the scurrying mass of ants is working to keep his wounds closed and his blood flowing.

"We're closing on Paris right now," another soldier says. "Are you going to join the push? I hear it's getting pretty hairy."

Papa is silent for a long moment, then shakes his head. "I have things that need to be taken care of." He glances down at me.

Laughter erupts around the table. I shut my eyes tightly. The musk of fear and excitement and anger momentarily overwhelms me. Papa's people have marked this place—this whole surface world—again and again and again with scents that scream, "No! Do not come here!" And yet...here we are.

I feel a presence off and to the side. A woman in an apron is jabbering at me in a language that I do not understand. I shake my head and hope she will go away, but she

speaks softly and slowly and gestures with her hands. She crouches down low but does not approach me or try to cover me with her musk.

She points over to the staircase, where two children sit. They smile at me. So, this woman is a queen. She blows her face up wide and makes an outsized chewing motion. I think she is asking me about food.

I murmur, "Sugar..." even though I know that she will laugh and refuse, like all the other queens.

But she smiles and goes off to a place at the far end of the room, where dozens of men crowd together and stamp their feet and wave their arms. When she returns, she's holding a little tray of sugar. I bring it up to my face and carefully sample it with my tongue.

She kneels a few feet from me and says things in a quick, low tone that is almost like a song.

The soldiers are still laughing with my father. He is tense and motionless.

The older soldier says, "It's okay. The war's almost over; it'll go through to the end even without you, Ernest."

"Olivia!" Papa shouts. "What're you doing?"

I startle. Sugar spills down my fingers.

The woman stands up and is about to say something to Papa, but then the room falls silent. Outside, there is shouting. Then we hear the whine of a falling bomb. The room erupts. Men jump, men fall. The woman turns and knocks me down with a sweep of her arm. Then she is on top of me. I struggle to get out from under her. She is coating me with her scent!



But there is something so beguiling about it. It is clean and pure and certain. It tells me that I am safe. I try to struggle free—it's my duty—but I cannot escape. And then, as the whine gets louder, her pores unload all their pent-up fear.

#

Mama is as long as my leg: she is the largest queen that has ever existed. Her backside groans with the billions and billions of eggs that are constantly growing inside her. Her legs are like bayonets that are coated in velvet. Her eyes are as wide as the bottom of the wine bottle that Papa drinks from. Her belly is thick and hard and jangly as a soldier's pack. And her mandibles are like two scythes. Once, when a man wandered into our cave, I saw those mandibles chop off his leg at the knee and then sever his screaming head.

Papa sits at the edge of the cave with his shirt open. He holds a loaf of bread in one hand and tears off hunks of it with his teeth. Ants scramble over each other to reach the fallen crumbs. Millions upon millions of ants cover every inch of him, right up to and including his eyes. They push the blood through his body and remove the waste from his bullet-stricken gut. There are no complaints. Mama's thick body vibrates with the multifaceted tone of command that contains a strain of song for each and every worker. She drags herself through the groove that her belly has worn in the dirt floor and delicately thrusts her legs into the wall around Papa, so she is resting right on top of him. Her mandibles caress Papa's cheek.

The cave is dark and Papa can see nothing.

He sighs. "I don't think I'll ever get tired of that song. When I first woke up in here, I was lying on the dirt and it was dark and I was bleeding, but that song told me that I was in the right place. When are you going to teach Olivia to sing like that?"

"She will grow into her song." Mama speaks without interrupting her song. Papa can only hear a fraction of it. It pours into me until I think I am on the verge of overflowing. But...today there is a part of me that it cannot reach.

"I don't understand why the Krauts had to kill that queen," I say.

"Careful," Papa says. "'Kraut' is fine when we're alone. But you're supposed to've grown up around here. They'll expect you to say 'Bosche.'"

"But she was so kind to me! And she wasn't dangerous; she barely marked me at all. I don't think she had even one single bit of territory."

"They're monsters," Papa says. "They'll kill everyone they can't enslave."

"But...they won't win, will they?"

"Maybe..." Papa says. "I don't know. I heard some disturbing talk. Our generals don't know what the hell they're doing. Sometimes they're timid and sometimes they're reckless. We're getting dangerously overextended. And each of their mistakes kills thousands of our boys."

"Well, if it's just soldiers, then that's fine," I say. I'm relieved. "Dying is what soldiers are for." Underneath me, the carpet of ants shifts slightly, but Mama soothes them with a change in her tone. She starts singing of the new territories they'll open up with their deaths.

Mama says, "You've seen enough, then? I need you here. The next group of princesses will hatch all too soon. You must teach them."

"Dammit, I saw a woman die today!" Papa says.

His hand gropes around in the mass of ants by his side. He grabs a dusty green-glass bottle and unstoppers it. When he tilts back his neck to drink, he reveals a patch of white on his throat that rises and falls with the guzzling motions.

"Can't we help them, Mama?" I say. "The Krauts don't just kill soldiers; they kill everyone."

The song changes and the ants boil over amongst themselves and I think she is about to fill me with anger and self-loathing. But instead she says, "It's good that you care for your Papa's people. Someday, they too will bow down to you."

Mama is the largest queen that has ever existed. But someday she will surrender that title to me.

I am ravenously hungry. I hold out my hands and a stream of ants crawl into it. Each one deposits a little speck of sugar. When I bow my head down to lick up the sugar, I hear the murmur of the workers:

"...carried this for a hundred thousand lengths..."

"...almost walked into a poisonous spray..."

"...didn't take even a bite of it for myself..."

I whisper down to them, "Thank you..." and they convulse with unexpected ecstasies. I lick up all the sugar, but I am still hungry.

#

It is only another week before we leave the cave again, but I've become much bigger: my human clothes barely fit. After we drive to town, Papa tries to talk to the

generals and tell them what they are doing wrong. Wherever we go, he is treated like a queen, but somehow he cannot seem to speak to the person he wants.

Then, a calamity.

Papa runs out of wine. Because the enemy destroyed the last supply train, none of the soldiers have any wine to share, so we drive ahead, into the area that our boys have not yet taken back from the other side.

To Papa, one side is the enemy, even though both sides love his books.

I thought the enemy's countryside would be filled with poison gas and ten-foot Krauts who danced on the torn-up bodies of innocent queens. But that is not the case. The other side is just like our own: huge ruts in the road, craters in open fields, collapsed houses, the charred wreckage of tanks and trucks. We drive through three villages before Papa decides to stop. He walks up to several houses and holds low conversations with their inhabitants before he finally emerges with a crate that is full of clinking bottles.

On the way back, our jeep gets stuck in the mud.

Papa leans on the back of the jeep and makes grunting noises while I hold the wheel and press down on the pedal when he tells me to. Finally, I get down and wander around back.

The ants inside him poke out from the edges of his eyes and scream to me, "Please end this torture! We need to rest! We need—"

I silence them with a snatch of song. I'm not as skilled as my mother. In her presence, they'd never even think to complain.

He says, "Guess we'll have to head back on foot. Doesn't matter. This is a wonderful day."

"Why don't you just push it?" I say.

Papa laughs. "Isn't it good to be out of that damn cave?" he says.

I flex my toes and dig the tips of my shoes into a less-muddy part of the ground.

Then I put my hand on the bumper and push the jeep forward.

When I look at Papa, he's stopped laughing. He's not moving. "How long have you been able to do that?" he says.

"Do what?" I say.

He shakes his head three times and then, suddenly, he's scooped me up off the ground and into the basket of his arms. He bounces me up and down a few times. I giggle.

"You're a tiny little thing," he says. "I bet I could toss you right up into that tree."

"No!" I say, and suddenly I am not sure whether or not he'll do it. Papa has told me enough stories to make me realize that he is capable of doing anything.

He bounces me once, then twice, and then his arms go limp. I drop down onto the ground and roll in the mud and hit my shoulder, with a slight crunching sound, against the bumper of the truck.

I slip around in the mud, trying to stand. Then I hear a squelch. Papa is on his knees. He's striped with thin black lines of ants. They are spilling from his eyes and ears and nose and from the eternally-open wounds beneath his clothes. The blackness pools at his feet.

On my hands and knees, I scramble to his side. His eyes are rolled upwards so I can only see the whites. Air is escaping from him, but he cannot say a word. I put my

head down amongst the milling ants. Millions of voices whisper upwards. The ants are holding some sort of mass meeting:

"...have to select our own leaders..."

"...free of that death trap..."

"Wasn't so bad in the stomach..."

"What are you doing! We have to go back! He'll die!"

"No! No more leaders...no more slavery...a free people should make decisions by consensus..."

"The queen will be oh so angry!"

"...his muscles are crowded with tens of thousands of dead workers. Can barely move amidst all the corpses..."

"I smell another queen nearby. We can ask her if she'll take us in..."

I scoop up a muddy handful of ants and lift them to my face. I fill my lungs and sing at them, "No! What are you doing! Get back inside of him!"

Down around my knees, the puddle of ants tenses up and then shimmers. A few of them crawl up onto me and start biting me. Others run off and escape into the ground. And some straggle back up into Papa. I try to sing louder, truer, and more beautifully. I try to put out enough song to capture each and every one of the traitors. But so many of them escape.

Still, it is enough remain. Papa's eyelids finally close. His chest starts to rise and fall. He gasps and spits out the mud that flecks his lips. But he does not speak.

My shoulder emits another crack when I pick him up, but I manage to deposit him in the back of the jeep, amongst his bottles of wine. I cover him with a tarp, and sit there

with his muddy body for hours. Cold creeps down into me from the hole in my shoulder. I'm caked with mud that flakes away into dirt as it dries. I do not know how to drive the jeep and I'm not sure I can carry him all the way home. Where is home? We are so far away that I can't even smell a hint of Mama.

A truckful of the enemy approaches. I duck down low under the edge of the tarp. If they knew who we were, then they would certainly kill us. Now I understand why the enemy is so murderous; they kill every other queen so that their soldiers cannot betray them and join another nest.

For a moment, I think that the soldiers are stopping, but then they jabber at each other in their language and their truck speeds up.

Every so often, an ant straggles out of Papa and tries to justify itself: "We are so sorry. His movements demanded so much work from us. And we were so hungry and exhausted. And then everyone just started moving at the same time. But we came back! We repented!"

I want to crush the ambassadors, but instead I smile at them and tell them that I love them and believe them and forgive them. For now, I need them. But when I get home, I will tell Mama to destroy every last one of the traitors.

Guns go off in the distance. Trucks fly past on the road. The air is full of yelling. I tremble. I am not like Mama. I do not have deadly mandibles with which to fight off the Krauts. Why did Mama bring me into this world? She says that someday I'll be a queen of men, but no human being has ever paid the slightest attention to my orders.

Then Papa stirs. He sits up and rests his back against the side of the jeep. "Has it been long?" he says.

"I don't know," I say. "It's dark now."

He puts an arm around my shoulder. "Don't worry," he says.

Then the air hisses through his teeth. His fingers are probing my shoulder.

"What's this?" he says. He's poking the caved-in place in my shoulder.

"Nothing," I say. "My skin broke open a bit when I fell."

"But...you look so normal..." he whispers. He lifts up the sleeve of my shirt. I crane my neck to look at the wound. The pale skin flaps loosely to reveal a dark black carapace underneath. The patch of carapace is dented and has several cracks. It is the first time I've ever thought about what was inside me. The sight makes me happy. Beneath the skin, I am just like Mama.

Then I see Papa's face. His eyebrows are wide open and the skin on his forehead is creased. "But...it will heal, won't it?" he says.

I cover the hole with my sleeve. "It doesn't hurt," I say.

"I thought...but you're so strong..."

On the road, a truck kicks up mud and then pulls to a stop. Men charge out towards us. They are holding rifles. I hiss and I prepare to jump at them. But then the lead soldier skids to a stop.

"Shit," he says. "It's Papa!"

Papa stands up. He's smiling and holding a bottle of wine. "Took you boys long enough to get here," he says.

The soldier laughs. Soon we're surrounded by soldiers. A few of them clamber into the jeep and Papa drives us all back into town. The drive is full of shouting and laughter, especially when Papa yells for me to climb into the driver's seat and take the



wheel. The soldiers cheer as the jeep lurches forward. For the first time, I realize that these soldiers are my boys too.

#

In our cave, Papa says, "You should've seen those Krauts squatting in their stolen farmhouses, slaughtering livestock and eating seedgrain. Well...our boys gave them what they deserved."

Mama's only response is a slight change in the tones of her song. Papa cannot see how the entire floor of the cave is moving or hear how the air is alive with screams. Mama has called her entire kingdom—billions upon billions of ants—up into the cave to witness the execution of the traitors. Tens of thousands of ants are cut open and left to die on a slight hillock at the front of the cave.

Papa, his body refreshed by an inflow of fresh ants, is rocking his body from side to side and beating the ground with his fist. "But our boys were something. They were wonderful. Ragged, but still fighting."

After a long moment, the screaming falls silent. The onlookers flow over the corpses of the traitors and then scurry back down into their tunnels. On their backs, they carry a chipped pewter bowl. Thousands of ants climb up to the lip of the bowl and regurgitate tiny drops of liquid into it. Finally, it hits Papa's knee.

"What the hell is this?" Papa grabs the bowl and dips a finger into it. "Some kind of pudding?"

Mama says, "Our foraging parties are having difficulty finding more human food for you."

"The fucking Krauts have laid waste to the countryside."

Mama says, "But I remember stories from my mother. She says that she once fed a guest with our own food for quite awhile."

Papa pushes the food away. Ants scramble into it and begin devouring the food, but they're arrested by a trill of song from Mama. "Two thirds of the houses were empty," Papa says. "Their owners are probably starving in some labor camp."

Mama lifts up her body and dances through the darkness. She plops herself right on top of Papa, and says, "Why do you dwell on your peoples' disintegration? In here, there's no war. Don't leave again. If you stay, I will keep you safe."

Papa tries to squirm out from under her.

"You can't understand," Papa says. "Life is too simple in here. You know from birth exactly what you've got to do. You don't need art or literature or courage or justice. But out there, people are free to do beautiful and terrible things."

"Someday we will have automobiles," Mama says. "Our daughters will learn the song that your people need to hear. And then they will bring us automobiles. And wine. And typing machines."

"The only song that we understand is the song of freedom," Papa says.

Mama clacks her mandibles; they barely miss Papa's face. He puts an arm on her back and slowly strokes her carapace. "There, there," he says.

"Stay here," she says. "Soon enough, the rest of your daughters will hatch. They will need you."

"Our boys are so tired and thin," Papa says. "I worry about them. Our generals don't know shit."

Mama's eyes are just a finger's length from Papa's. Her mandibles span his head. Another clack and he will be headless. Papa's unseeing eyes stare right through her.

His face twists. "You really want me to eat this bug-ridden mush? I can't even see, dammit."

I call out, "There's a lamp in the jeep. I can go get it, Papa!"

"Olivia's in here? Why would you start in on me when she's here?"

Papa picks up Mama by the waist and deposits her on the ground. Then he's scrambling for his pack. "I need to go back out there," Papa says. "Someone has to bear witness to all that madness and folly."

"Take Olivia," Mama says.

Papa is silent for a moment. I know he is thinking about my shoulder. He made me promise not to mention it to Mama.

"A war is no place for a child," Papa says. "Let her stay here and sing with you."

"She needs to make her own place," Mama says. "I drove out my sisters, because I knew there was not room enough for all of us. Now I am larger than any queen that has ever existed. And there is not room enough for me. Olivia is larger still. You must teach her the songs that your people need to hear."

Papa slams a fist against the wall of the cave. The hand is swallowed up by the ants, and makes only a soft thud when it hits. "That doesn't...that's not possible! She will never lead real men. She'll get chewed up and destroyed out there."

"My workers sometimes begin to think they are special, too," Mama says. "They drag their feet and cry out for freedom and trumpet their dignity. And then I sing to them, and they forget everything but my voice."

Papa is groping his way out of the cave. I follow along just behind him. As we turn a corner, light floods around us and I see him transform. He stands up straight and stops crawling along, open-mouthed, slack and hesitant. He's tall and strong now. Why can't Mama see how the darkness saps him of his strength?

I run forward and hug him.

"Are you leaving us?" I say.

"You'll do fine without me," Papa says. "Your mother, well she...I'll always be grateful to her. She saved my life. But I can't spend the rest of my life in a cave."

"At least let me come with you!"

"You'll have your sisters soon. They'll be more to you than I could ever be..."

He throws his pack into the back of the jeep and climbs in. He's about to drive away forever! I trill a tiny snatch of song, and, suddenly, his knee spasms. I rush forward to catch him as he falls. In his knee, the ants sigh out relief at the momentary cessation of work.

"You're still weak," I say.

"Dammit, when will these wounds heal?"

He suffers me to lift him into the front seat of the jeep and says nothing when I climb up next to him.

#

We spend an entire night digging our way towards the basement of a farmhouse that the enemy has turned into a command center. Papa spells me sometimes, using a spade and a shovel to dig. But I sing some of the local ants away from their queen. They assist me, working constantly. And my flying fingers move more dirt than all the rest of

them combined. My shoulder cracks sometimes, until I strap up the wound with tight bandages. Finally, I open the tiniest hole in the through the mortar of the basement and Papa sits there in the dirt and listens to the conversations of the enemy general.

On the way back, we see a sentry and Papa's face goes very still. He makes many hand motions to me. I think we are supposed to try to sneak around behind the sentry. But instead I weave a complex song and ants boil up out of the ground and invade the man. He falls down, twitching, while Papa whispers, "Dammit, that wasn't necessary."

I sing out to the ants and they begin to take control of the man's muscles. He rises up. The man shouts some words that I cannot understand, but then my ants clamp down on his throat.

Papa's eyes are wide. He looks at the Kraut as if he is me, and then he looks at me as if I am the Kraut.

"It's okay," I say to Papa. "His body is ours now."

The sentry walks with us through enemy territory. His eyes dart from side to side, but the rest of him moves with sure-footed confidence: the ants inside him know this territory better than he ever could.

When we are far enough from the camp, I withdraw the ants and leave him collapsed on the ground.

"You can shoot him now!" I say to Papa.

"Is he still alive?" Papa says.

"I don't know...Mama usually chops off their heads right afterwards. But I can't do that. I don't have the mandibles."

"That was...you enslaved him."

"He's the enemy." Is Papa confused? This has been a very tiring week.

"You can't do that again."

I know that Papa just doesn't understand me, but he won't listen to anything I say. Instead, he keeps muttering about enslavement until I finally promise him that I won't use the bodies of any more Krauts.

When we get back to town, he barges into the military headquarters and yells at a general. He files reports with his newspaper, but the generals say that the reports contain secrets, so Papa's stories never appear in the paper. He screams into many telephones. Papa tells the generals where to strike, but they won't listen.

He pools the liquor rations of a whole battalion of officers and throws a party. It lasts for three days, although Papa and I are the only ones who stay the entire time. During the party, he loudly yells his recommended strategies to anyone who will listen. And, just as loudly, he berates the generals for their cowardice and stupidity.

At one point, a lady journalist sits on his lap and one of the soldiers tries to guide me up to my room. But I shake free of his hand and move closer.

The journalist says, "I hear you found a girl that you didn't even know you had."

"Her mother's a real monster," Papa says. "But...she had something. A kind of fire to her..."

"And will you go back to her?"

This other queen is getting her smell all over Papa. I am not sure that Mama will want him back after this.

Papa maneuvers the journalist off of his lap and onto a nearby chair. "You know...I didn't think so," he says. "But...there are more kids that need looking after. I bet

they'd be something really special, those kids...if they could just be guided properly..."

And then he looks at me in a way that I do not like. He tries to smile, but the smile is lopsided.

The next morning, while he is sick from liquor, he hears that the generals want to imprison him, so we escape back to the cave.

"Not a moment too soon," Papa says. "You're getting too old to be around so many men."

We've been outside for a month, and I've changed tremendously. For weeks, I'd felt a strange pressure inside my skin. The pain, at times, grew intense. But then, one night, I dreamed that I was being sawed in half by a giant Kraut, and then I woke up to find my bed covered in viscera and broken bits of carapace. I felt my shoulder; it was renewed. My body felt strange. None of my clothes fit. My new carapace was six inches taller, had hair in new places, and the chest of a human queen. The carapace sat unsteadily on me; when I got out of the bed, I had to grip a chair to keep from toppling over.

I didn't want Papa to see the disgusting gore on the bed, so I forced myself into my old clothes and wrapped up the bedsheets and left the inn—luckily, it was still dark—to deposit the soiled load deep in the forest.

In the morning, all Papa said was, "Hmm. We'll have to get you some new clothes."

But when we reach the cave, I know that the nest has noticed the changes in me. The ants rustle as I approach, and they stay away from me. When a few of the ants from

inside Papa run down to rejoin their former fellows, they're butted and buffeted away as if they'd become part of a rival nest.

The place *smells* different. Disgusting. Foreign. Before, it just smelled like home. What's gone wrong with my senses?

When we round a corner, we come upon Mama. Her head is flush with a barrel that she is shoving forward with her massive body. The barrel rides on a thick carpet of ants. Shockingly, despite the song trilling from Mama, I hear a few wisps of protest from the ants:

"Please...it's crushing me..."

"We'll go back to work...just a moment of rest..."

As I come closer to Mama, my skin goes cold and all the tiny hairs of my body stand up. A sour taste hits the back of my mouth. Something about her repulses me.

She turns away and leaves the ants to move the barrel on their backs. "So, you've become a queen," she says.

"I...I suppose." I do not feel like a queen.

Papa is tromping forward. He throws his pack on the ground in his own corner and is surprised to not hear it thump. He reaches out a hand and touches a mattress. "My god..." he says. He sits on the mattress and reaches for the almost-empty bottle of liquor that he left behind. When he pulls it up, the bottle is brand-new.

"What have you...?" he says.

He cannot see that the cave is stacked high with barrels of wine and pallets of cans and boxes of army rations. He takes a swig from the bottle and then pulls the blanket up around him. When he tries to lie down, his head bangs against a typewriter.



"Was it very awful out there?" Mama says.

I think I see the hint of a smile on Papa's face, but then his expression becomes very grave. "The damn fools," he says. "They're leading our boys into the slaughterhouse. They're throwing away lives by the hundreds of thousands and no one can stop them."

As Papa expounds on the generals' idiocy, Mama turns her eyes to me. I never before realized how hard and dry and cold they could be. So different from my and Papa's soft, liquid eyes. "How long will you be staying?" she whispers to me.

I settle down near the entrance, as far from her as I can possibly sit.

I am the largest queen that has ever existed.

#

Even before the first frost, I can see that Mother is slowing down. Still, she keeps acting recklessly. Before, she went months without ever leaving cave. Now, she goes out every day in order to forage for more food for Papa.

While she is gone, I am terrified by the grumblings of the ants.

"When the rest of the eggs hatch, we'll have to work even harder..."

"...it's the human, he's the one who's seduced her..."

"The other one is to blame as well...she eats so much..."

I cannot sing loud enough to quiet them.

Papa spends more time in his cot, drinking and telling stories to the darkness. Sometimes he likes to look at the almost-hatched eggs of my sisters and talk about the things that he'll show them and the world that they'll create: a kinder and more beautiful world. I think he has almost started to believe in Mama's vision.

In the mornings, he hunches over the typewriter and operates it with much cursing and banging and complaining about the darkness. Whenever he finishes a page, he quickly stows it away in his pack without letting me see it.

Sometimes he gets geared up to go out, but Mother always arranges for his blind gropings to encounter an unopened bottle before he can leave.

Finally, Papa says, "Dammit. You'll have to do for now. People are dying out there, and I know that we can do something about it."

I am thrilled at the thought of leaving. Since we came back, the cave has only gotten more colder and darker. I wonder how Papa—who's seen so much more of the world than I have—can stand it for even a second. We leave while Mama is out.

Papa leads me along a side road. He's in fine spirits. He even lets me drive the jeep. He wants to eavesdrop on their movements again, so he can pass the intelligence to the generals. But as we spy on an enemy convoy that's stopped nearby, I realize something:

"The generals won't act on our information," I say. "They never act on it. It's up to us to win this war for them."

Unless I act, the Krauts will destroy the entire world. The weight of it makes my legs twitch. I finally understand what it means to be a queen.

So I sing out and ants climb one of the enemy trucks and into the body of the driver. His mouth opens in horror as his body stamps onto the accelerator and runs over some of the soldiers milling in front of him. They shout and try to get out of the way, but the truck is too big and too fast. It collides with another truck and they both topple. The enemy is running everywhere, wildly. My Kraut screams apologetics as his hand pulls

out his gun and starts shooting his former comrades. My ants go inside a few more of the Krauts and they begin to fire as well. Soon enough, everyone is dead.

"Come on, Papa!" I say. "I know how to do it now! We can go and destroy their general!"

"My God," he says. "What the hell are you doing? Those men were screaming for mercy."

"Hurry, we need to move quickly," I rush across the road. I grab up a gun, just because it seems right to hold one. Papa was wrong. Soon enough, I'll fulfill both Mama's vision and Papa's. I'll rule over men, and I'll end the war. Everything will be unified in me!

Papa just barely scrambles into the jeep before I push the accelerator and speed us off towards their headquarters. All the way there, he remonstrates with me and tells me that men are supposed to be free and that I cannot treat them like that and that I am no better than they are. I know that he just doesn't understand, but there is no time to explain it to him right now.

Before nightfall, I've destroyed the village that the enemy had occupied. It takes an hour, since there are so many soldiers to invade and so many soldiers to kill. Mostly, they do not realize that I am there. But at one point a grenade explodes, and knocks me around, opening up a hole in my hip. I bind it up as best I'm able, but I know that I'll have to be more careful in the future.

Eventually, Papa falls silent, and just watches me. I keep waiting for him to smile and tell me that I am doing well, but he says nothing.

Once the headquarters is destroyed, I want to keep going. I am not tired. I am well capable of fighting my way from unit to unit, until I eventually reach Hitler himself. Once I kill Hitler, all the soldiers will be leaderless and can then be captured using the same kind of songs that Hitler used.

But then Papa stumbles and I realize that he is tired. I catch him and try to make him lean on me, but he shakes me off. Once in the jeep, I drive us back towards the cave.

I say, "The enemy won't soon forget today."

"You...you're...you're taking away their freedom. This is against all the rules of war..."

I tell him that these Krauts have no freedom. They are just soldiers; they can obey one queen or they can obey another queen. They can die for one master or they can die for another master. I know now that for human beings, the identity of the queen is not as straightforward as for ants. The queen is not always a large female. Many times, the queen is a man. Sometimes I think that Papa is a queen, too. But the point is that it's no tragedy if soldiers die, because they have no power to do or create any of the beautiful things that are so prized by Papa and me. The only tragedy is when queens die.

I know that Papa realizes this instinctively, or he wouldn't be so worried all the time about "the generals" and how they're wasting our soldiers. Wasting your own soldiers is wrong, just like wasting food is wrong. But wasting enemy soldiers is not wrong.

The Krauts are evil because they needlessly and recklessly kill queens, and our boys are good because they rescue queens.

He tries to tell me that I am wrong wrong wrong about how humankind works. He tries to tell me that all human beings have dignity and deserve to be free. It sound so much like the bleatings of the lowly ant workers that I am tempted to laugh.

I am driving fast, now, and Papa's shouted words are carried away by the wind. I laugh. He reaches out and tries to grab hold of the wheel. The jeep swerves and skids in the mud. I hurriedly sing a few chords of song and his hand falls limp. After I regain control of the jeep, it is a few moments before I realize that Papa is slumped over. I tell the ants inside him to go back to work everywhere except his throat and the muscles of his arms and legs. The silence is not bad. I finally have a moment to enjoy my triumph. The cool blue air of the forest fills my entire body.

Once we reach the cave, I restore full function to his body. He climbs out. I stay up in the jeep. He looks at me for a long while. And then he turns away. When I drive off, I'm scared to be alone, but I'm also almost glad to leave him. Today, his presence was a burden.

#

I rampage freely. I shadow our boys as they move forward, and stories begin to circulate about mass defections and rebellions amongst the Krauts: entire companies that fell to infighting and wiped themselves out. I learn that my hands can easily break a man's back or neck. As the fighting grows more desperate, I often find myself in close combat with the enemy. I acquire more holes in my body, and sometimes I feel like I am held together more by gauze and glue than by skin and chitin.

The soldiers call out for me to lie with them, but I ignore them. I am aging too rapidly. I do not have much longer to live, and I know that the generals are too

incompetent to finish this war on their own. I must concentrate on destroying the enemy before I die.

For a time, I feel like I have failed my mother. I haven't learned the songs that humans need to hear: although my ants can control their bodies, I've made no progress with their minds.

I will never become mankind's queen.

But then I remember my sisters. Once I protect them from the scourge of Hitler, they will have all the time in the world to learn the right songs. And...well...perhaps it's not too much to hope that some of those songs will be about me.

It is April and I am resting in my room at the inn. I need more rest now than I once did: I am already carrying more than a few strands of gray hair.

There is a furious banging on my door. When I open it, Papa flows into the room.

"Had a devil of a time finding you..." he says.

But his voice is overshadowed by the chorus of ants, "We brought him to you, my queen! The traitors said to kill him, but we knew you'd want him!"

Papa staggers back and forth across my room and rages at me in his usual pedantic way, but the chorus of ants helps me to piece together what happened.

Mama had a difficult winter: sensing herself growing old, she insisted on taking foraging parties out into the snow so that there'd be enough food for Papa and the newly-hatched princesses. But food for the ant soldiers ran low. They started to look enviously at the supplies heaped up in the cave. Eventually, when Mama was gone, they broke free from her song and gorged themselves on the supplies. When Mama returned, she tried to ensnare them with her song, but the revelry and anger and hunger proved too strong, and

they rebelled openly. They swarmed her and the princesses and bit them relentlessly.

Papa was out, puttering through the woods, but, before she died, Mama managed to drag herself out and warn him. Inside him, a loyalist faction asserted control and expelled the rebels from his body. The loyalists held him together while searched the battlefields of Europe for signs of me.

Finally, I'm able to understand his ramblings. "She's dead. Our girls are dead. I still don't quite understand what hit them. It was some sort of disease, I think. I knew that we were creating something unholy...but...god...why did you have to be the one to survive?"

He throws a map case onto my table.

"Read it," he says.

The case is full of papers. They're muddy and disheveled and even the very first page is full of errors—the pages were clearly composed in the dark. While I sit down to read, Papa roots through my room until he finds a bottle of wine that had been delivered by one of my admirers.

In Papa's book, a wounded soldier is rescued by a young prince and nursed to health in an isolated mountain village. The prince brings the soldier right into his home: the country is ruled by an impoverished line of kings who live in a decrepit manor. There, the cultured and widely-travelled soldier befriends the King and starts to tutor the prince and his brothers.

Meanwhile, the war rages down in the valley. The soldier's army is annihilated just outside the borders of the kingdom. In order to preserve the neutrality of his country, the King orders that, from now on, all escaped soldiers should be detained. A former

comrade escapes from the roundups and knocks on the soldier's door, but, after much soul-searching, the soldier decides that he cannot break the neutrality of his new home: he turns his comrade over to the authorities.

The prince loves his tutor, but he also loves guns and loud cars and crisp black uniforms. The tutor tries to teach the prince about freedom and respect, but the prince insists on assembling the villagers into a brigade of conscript soldiers whom he drills mercilessly, even as their crops rot. When the tutor protests, the prince just says that he wants his country to be prepared to fight. The tutor, though, knows that this is absurd. This tiny country could never stand up to any major power in a fight.

Finally, after many arguments, the prince summons the tutor and says that the tutor has convinced him. He takes the tutor out for a drive. Even though it is a day for scheduled military drills, the fields are filled with workers. But then the tutor sees the brigade assembled up front. He is confused. If the workers are undertaking a drill, then who is working the fields? He jumps out of the car and runs to the nearest worker. It's the tutor's comrade. He's been hobbled and put to work as slave labor.

The tutor is horrified. On the drive back, while the prince is gunning the mountainous turns at high speeds, the tutor argues with the prince and finally grabs the wheel of the car. The vehicle goes spinning over the edge of the cliff, with the prince inside of it. The tutor, who's managed to jump free of the car, starts to walk back to the manor. He hopes he can do a better job with the prince's younger brothers...but he can't stop remembering the wide-eyed look on the prince's face: while the car spun out of control, the prince had lifted his hands and surrendered the wheel to the tutor...up to the very last moment, he'd trusted his tutor with his life.



"But I'm not neutral," I say. "I am winning the war. I am beating the Krauts."

He nods sadly. "You've become worse than them."

"I'm not like this prince," I say. "I never trusted you."

Then there's another knock on the door. It slips open. A little girl stands in the doorway and says, "Papa, you were gone so long..."

He rushes forward and picks her up. I move towards them, but he turns around to shield her from me. "Let's put you back to bed, Bernadette," he says.

"Who is that?" she says.

"She's no one," Papa murmurs.

I come close and the ants inside of him say, "Oh yes! The queen is here! She'll reward us for our loyalty!"

I sing to them, "This girl is your queen now. Obey her. Take care of her. Guide her."

Papa's hair is still dark. He's so young. He will outlive me, and this girl, and her daughters, and on and on and on. He'll be able to fill thirty generations of us with lies about me. I want to snap his neck.

But I don't. He still has a function: this little princess will need him.

I silently forgive him for his cruel caricature. This softhearted little boy isn't responsible for his actions. I'd thought he was a queen, but he turned out to be just another soldier.

## **Elephant Foot**

### **I**

One of Raghvendra's first postings was as chief development officer for an underdeveloped zilla in northern Kerala, along the Malabar coast. Although only 26 years old, he was in charge of managing federal government efforts to lift 1.1 million people out of poverty. He lived in a government bungalow on a beach, about forty kilometers from the district capital. It took him an hour and a half to reach the district offices every day. The drive gave him time to read the briefs that poured in from the center every day.

His driver, Sardar, lived on a cot in the back room--a space no more than five feet wide--of the bungalow, but he spent most of the day out at the tea shop a few hundred yards from the district offices. Sometimes it took him a few moments to notice Raghvendra standing on the steps, whistling for his car. But the civil servant didn't protest. Sardar was the only driver he'd ever had who didn't blast his horn, weave in and out of traffic, blow past bicycles, upset animals, and generally cause mayhem on the road. When they were in the car, time did not exist.

As the new man in the district, Raghvendra was much in demand for social engagements. One night, he and Sardar drove one hundred kilometers to eat at the villa of a local zamindar. They arrived at a riverside pavilion overlooking acre upon acre of paddy. While the zamindar probed him for information about how he would allocate

money under the latest irrigation scheme, Raghvendra sipped the man's whiskey and ate lightly fried fish who had bones so delicate and soft that he could crunch them down and swallow them.

The dinner finished as night was falling. The zamindar offered them a bed for the night, but Raghvendra shook his head. He insisted on sending them off with a bottle of whiskey.

When he got into the car, he glanced at Sardar, who'd been sleeping in the backseat and listening to the crackling radio. They drove two kilometers down the road and then pulled off into a dusty clearing. The headlights of the car glinted across the acres upon acres of paddy: two dozen people were wading, thigh-deep, through the waters. And the evening was alive with the static of insects noises. Sardar brought out a chair and put it just to the side of the car, while he sat in the open door of the passenger side. They passed the bottle back and forth. Sardar wiped it before and after each pull. Raghvendra did not.

As the sun set, the fieldworkers waddled out of the paddy. Below the water line, their legs were absurdly distended and swollen up from the river-parasites. As they passed the car, they nodded at him and he nodded at them. One of his responsibilities was to ensure that their children never acquired the same ailment.

When night fell, Sardar climbed into the back seat first, then Raghvendra checked the level on the bottle of whiskey. "Right up to the top of the label," he said, loud enough for Sardar to hear. He locked the bottle in the boot of the car and then he climbed into the back, wrapped his arm around the driver's waist, and fell asleep.

## II

While the car was stopped at the light, the market street continued flowing around us. A rickshaw was stopped just a few feet away from us. The driver's legs hung down, fat and heavy, the toes were balloons, bursting grotesquely out of his sandals.

When a person has a hugely-swollen limb with crusted-over skin, and that limb is a foot, then they have elephant-foot. Often, though, the elephant is not a foot. The condition frequently affects the genitals, causing the scrotum to swell to the size of a basketball. Elephantiasis is a failure of the lymphatic system--often caused by parasites or heavy metal toxicity--that causes the buildup of fluid in the extremities. In real life, the sight does not cause children to scream.

"What's wrong with his legs?"

The man looks to the side and smiles with the edges of his lips. He makes a 'tchouk-tchouk' sound.

Most of the time, an elephant-limb will eventually become paralyzed.

"Come on...don't stare at him."

In a movie, however, the child would scream.

Horror and pity are instincts which are reserved for human beings. Some animals have tricked their way into human beings' pity centers by having faces that are very soft and round, like those of a baby. Elephants are one of these creatures.

People with elephant-foot are the opposite. Their bodies do not look human, so they do not receive instinctive compassion.

Adults do not scream either. Sometimes they cry. They think they're supposed to cry.

## **Book Festival**

By Rahul Kanakia

Kiss is sitting on the edge of the bench, trying not to move too much--her whole body is still bruised from last night's beating--but her left arm and leg periodically jerk with lingering convulsions--Jad's stun-rod was set to low power, but it's still taken days for her leg to regain feeling--that draw sideways glances from the hundred-year-olds who've crowded into the garden to drop off their float-pallets of yellowing and mildewed books off at the festival. Her twitching hands can barely keep hold of her muddy and torn copy of *The Silhouette Of A Heart*. The grass of the hillside is still in her hair and the zombie makeup--worn for two days--has made her eyes puffy but she's decided that's okay because she hasn't slept in two days and she's afraid that if she takes off her makeup then her gang will figure out that she's still here and anyway she just needs to remember to be cool and calm and cold and still as a zombie. Her stomach makes a cold, crunching noise: she is almost out of nutrifluid—her gang took all her cans after they beat her—and whenever she asks one of the hundie food vendors if they can sell her some more, they only laugh and offer her more of their nasty, greasy solid food. When she turns it down, the hundies think she's being health-conscious, they tell her—“oh wow,

don't worry about it...rejuvenation will clear up all those arteries no problem"—but it's not that, it's just that chewing up solid food makes her feel like she is eating the insides of her cheeks and lips. Only a few more hours until she can leave here for good. In his call, Mr. Gardenas said that he loved her manuscript. It's all done. It's all set. All she needs to do is sign and then she's free to live out there among the old people. The hundies are gross, but they know something--she can feel it, sometimes, when she meets their eyes. They've tasted that holy fire. She rubs the sides of her arms to try to quiet their twitching. Her gang will beat her again if she tries to stay in the garden.

A pair of hundred-year-olds stand just a few feet away from Kiss: the man is near-naked in a silver codpiece and the woman is wearing a very short skirt that reveals her hard, shiny thighs. They're walking through a pavilion heaped with teetering stacks of books that are kept upright by the constant nudging of spider robots' wire arms. The hundie volunteers try to wave off new donations, but people ignore them and send their pallets of used books right into the center of the pavilion, where the overworked, overprogrammed spider-robots snatch them up and assort them into tall, rigid stacks that are already twice as tall as a man and are still growing. As the scantily-clad hundie couple walks through the pavilion, Kiss sees the spiderbots proffer books to them with a chorus of cheerful robotic 'This is recommended specially for you!' Colorful butterflies bounce upwards off the books and circle the tent, flirting around the dozens of teens and twentysomethings gobbling their way wholesale through the stacks, toppling stacks and grabbing up books by the indiscriminate armful. One of the young people bounces twenty paperbacks up into her arms and tries to smile at Kiss, but Kiss wants no part of that—she's heard they're planning on burning the books later on. Kiss tries to bury herself in

*Silhouette*, Kiss turns the page...*the creature—he was still recognizable as a man, despite the muck and blood—was bent over the corpse of the guy who'd followed Isabel out of the nightclub. Isabel knew she should be frightened of the creature, but she felt strangely at ease—after all, hadn't he maybe just saved her life? The creature's flesh was smooth and waxy-pale and vibrated with the surge of strange fluids. And below his grey eyes, so bright and unwavering and honest and true, his mouth opened into a dark, bloody maw, a bottomless cavern of churning bits of brain and gore and then a howl leapt from the back of its throat—a howl that went on and on, until Isabel realized it was harmonizing with the thumping beat coming from the doors of the nightclub...* Nearby, the hundie woman tickles the spine of a book and it pushes upward further, but then she says, oh, "I have an electronic copy of this one. No more physical books, I promised myself--took *days* to drag my whole library out to the donation tent." She looks around at the young people grabbing up armfuls of books. "But it was worth it...look how interested they are—they're starved for words."

The hundie man kneads his woman's buttock. "If that's what they're really up to," he says. "I heard they're planning a bonfire. Tonight. 8 PM. During the closing ceremonies..."

The woman's head twitches. "No. That's ridiculous. The organizers would stop them."

The man nods his head, murmurs, "It'd be worth it if they also got rid of all those copies of *The Silhouette Of A Heart*. Have you seen that crap?"

The two hundies are rocking up onto the edge of their toes. They've found themselves at the edge of the pavilion. All across the gardens, hundies are lying on

benches, hands over each other, undressing, touching, kissing. It is not often that they are able to force their way into the garden. After the weekend, the Book Festival will be over, and they'll have to go back to their offices and schools and police stations and stores and apartments. The hundies look at Kiss' bench: it rears up a little under her butt--the damn thing wants to shake itself out and run to them. Hundies have been circling around her bench all day. She doesn't know how to handle this. Normally she'd either go somewhere else or call her gang together to give them a boot party. Here, she can do neither. In her zombie costume or out of it, Kiss stands out--whenever she so much as smiles at a hundie, they sidle close, put a hand on her shoulder, whisper to her confidentially, asking her whether they're *really* planning a burning. Why do hundies pretend like they have some special connection to books. None of them have ever written a book. Almost no one has. Just Theresa Hall and, now, Kiss. She flips for the thirtieth time to the last few pages of *Silhouette* and reads Theresa Hall's acknowledgment's...*and I'd like to thank my editor at Amazon: Gabriel Gardenas, Without Gabe's advice and encouragement, The Silhouette Of A Heart would never even have been written.* If Mr. Gardenas thinks that Kiss' book is good and worth publishing, then it must be true. Kiss' manuscript—fifty pages in very small type—crinkles a little as she shifts positions: the manuscript is in an envelope that is taped to her back. There are plenty of things she's left behind, but not that! She'll never forget the six days she spent writing it: her wrists aching, her mind all dry and cracked from lack of sleep, the pen slashing through the paper as that holy fire flowed through her whole body. A moan goes up from the hundie who's stretched out on the next bench over; the man whose head is between her legs must be newly



rejuvenated—his hair has black roots and silver ends. Old people no longer believe in love: they will fuck anything, anywhere.

Her thumb brushes across the open pages of her copy of *Silhouette*: she can almost *feel* the ink under her finger. A nearby hundie alternates between pulling drags of filthy air into his lungs from a cigarette and snarling a clotted mass of blood and muscle and wheat that bulges obscenely from his fingers. Her bruises twinge. By now, everyone in the garden must know that her gang threw her a boot party last night. But she is done with them. She is ready to grow up. Someday she'll be old and obscene and have dead little eyes that sit like pebbles deep within her skull and she will love it. She tries to return to the book...*Isabel couldn't believe it. The zombie was back, and he was on the center of the dancefloor. The man, immaculate in his blue suit, was moving his limbs with very precise, fluid motions—as if his joints operated on ball bearings—that were perfectly synchronized to the music. With his mouth closed, he'd look almost human, if it wasn't for the stillness of his expression—"Sorry is anyone sitting here? Oh no, keep reading, I just need to rest my feet."*—*he locked eyes with a young woman—a clubrat who Isabel'd seen around for years—and she laughed, turning to grind herself on his crotch. Some weird part of Isabel noticed that the club-rat's attention was making the zombie visibly erect, but the zombie's attention wasn't focused on her: his eyes scanned the periphery of the club. Three times its still, lifeless eyes swept over Isabel and she didn't know whether to feel relief or disappointment. But then, on the fourth pass, it looked at her very deliberately, and opened its mouth. A white and red fluid trickled down from its lips—froth and blood mixed together. And then it very slowly bent its head and took the earlobe of the club-rat between its wet teeth and bit down. The woman was*

*thrashing and screaming, but Isabel couldn't hear a thing: the music was too loud...* Kiss glances at the woman who has sat down next to her: the woman's nametag says AMY BLUMEYER. A soft blue light spills from the woman's unfocused eyes as she flicks them from side to side: she's accessing her lens computer. Every child learns that an old person usually has a too-smooth, too tight face; hard, well-toned muscles; a slender waist; large, high breasts; long hair; and a reflexive smile, even when nothing's happening. But sometimes a person can *look* very old and yet still somehow be different.

Then AMY BLUMEYER notices that Kiss is examining her and she says, "Excuse me, but are you Karen DeLisle?"

"No one ever calls me that," Kiss says.

"I work with Gabe. I think you two talked on the phone earlier today?"

The strands of Amy's bangs flap lightly in the wind, but Kiss' hair, stiffly gelled around a mock wound in the back of her head, doesn't move at all. She picks at the dried paint: flecks of red come away under her fingernail. "You have the contracts?" Kiss says.

"Forgive us," Amy says. "We're still trying to dig up a lawyer who knows something about this. It's been a long time since anyone has put out an original."

"You published *Silhouette*," Kiss says.

"I know," Amy smiles. "And our contracts with Theresa were a mess. We're still sorting out who owes money to who."

Kiss closes her book. "You've met her, then?" The author of *Silhouette* never made public appearances--people said she didn't even have a phone.

Amy reaches over, tilts Kiss' book towards her, and dislodges a nodule of mud with her thumb. "This is a well-loved copy," she says.

"It's the best book that's ever been written," Kiss says.

A laugh starts to emerge from Amy, but she stifles it.

"What? You don't agree?"

"Well, I know that a lot of people love it," Amy says. "My sisters are crazy about zombies now."

"When my book comes out, will you send her a copy?" Kiss says. "Take the cost out of my advance. I just want her to see it."

"She already has," Amy says. "We had to run it by her: there was a chance she might've objected to the infringement."

"And...she liked it? She must have, right?"

"She didn't have any objections."

Kiss twists up the book in her hand. The glances and stares of old people make her feel like she's twelve again, sitting still in school, before they cancelled it. Amy glances past Kiss, yells and waves at the hundies fucking on the next bench. The man with black roots looks up and says, "Oh wow Amy, just give me a minute to finish up."

Now that Amy is here, Kiss' protective shield of fuck-you is gone, and the hundies close in. They keep touching Amy on the arm, the elbow, the shoulder, the back of the neck—she is wearing a dress that offers up her breasts to them and ends mid-thigh. The hundies keep angling around Kiss, glancing sideways at her. One even says, "And who is your friend here?" but Amy guides him away with a hand at the waist.

Kiss remembers her last morning in the home meadow: Jad was singing to the sun, Yellow and Chili were arguing about whether Isabel should've tried to leave the zombie behind, and Pop was standing over the fire, creating an infusion of nutrifluid and

berries, and raving to Kiss about how brilliant her manuscript was and how it deserved to be the next *Silhouette*. And then they saw her with her pack, getting ready to go back to the festival. Their faces turned towards her, all closed-up and grim, and even though the sunlight was shining, Kiss couldn't feel it anymore. Jad said, "No. You're really gonna sell out to them? They *invaded* our garden..."

Amy has probably never lived in a garden.

Kiss holds out the book—the bloody teeth on the cover glint in the sunlight. The cover is suddenly very strange to her: she has an odd desire to cut it into pieces and consume it.

"Here, take it," Kiss says. "I know every word anyway."

Amy waves her hand. "No, no, I can't take your only copy."

When Kiss forces it into her hand anyway, Amy leans closer and whispers, "Besides, I was the one who recommended to Gabe that we buy *Silhouette*."

Kiss' organs squeeze up inside her. Before she'd realized it was just a way for a pack of sneering hundies to invade the garden, she'd thought for sure that the Book Festival would be *full* of *Silhouette*-lovers.

Kiss says, "Ohgod, really? Wait, what did you think of the ending? I mean, come on, can the zombie talk or can't he! Why does the book end there?!"

The other woman's teeth are crooked and there's a slight scar on the side of her face. Amy is still too young to have been rejuvenated. And yet she managed to find a job! Kiss sometimes browses the job listings, but they all require twenty or more years of experience. "Well...I think...when you're desperate enough, you hear what you want to hear..." Amy says.

"And what did you think of Isabel? I just..."

"I guess she can be a bit flat..."

"I *know*," Kiss says. "Some people don't like to hear that. But she is *so* flat. She's like...a nobody. But, really, I mean, she's just the narrator: the book is really the zombie's story."

A hundie tries to enter their conversation with some quip about zombie-fucking, but Amy turns, boxing him out and says, "Yeah, and heroines don't need to be like that! I just uploaded a great one. *Jane Eyre*? It's more obscure, but I found it in our archives. I really think it could get a high enough rating to get reprinted...In that one, the heroine, Jane, gets so disgusted by the behavior of the love interest that she goes away and—"

"Christ, is that really a copy of that zombie book?"

The man with the black roots—MORGAN PILOCKI, according to his nametag—shoves himself down between them. Kiss jerks away, she can't bear to look at the hundie; she feels like she can actually see the pussy juice glinting on his face. But he puts his big hand onto Amy's. He is wearing a vest that hangs open to show his hairless, well-defined chest: Amy's arm brushes against it as he brings the book closer to his face.

He opens the book to a random page and reads, out loud, "To take her mind off of not having heard from her mother in days, Isabel headed to the club. Since the zombie's very public biting incident—which they'd written off as a random act by some drugged-up crazy—they'd added new security. But the moment she got inside, the first thing she saw was the man—shiny and cool in his blue suit—leaning with an elbow on the table, surveying the dancers. Isabel gasped and thought about screaming but in that moment made up her mind not to. Why had she come here, if not to see him again? A woman in a

club dress with holes cut out to bare her torso approached him. Isabel held her breath. They were almost face to face. But then the light hit her face and Isabel saw the blood dripping from her mouth: she was a zombie too. She and the man rubbed their cheeks together, smearing the blood so thoroughly that it appeared to be nothing more than the rosy-cheeked glow of a healthy human being. Isabel looked around the room. No one was breathing. No one was talking. They all danced with an eerie precision; they came together and pulled apart like the swirling fractal permutations of a screensaver. Everyone in the club was a zombie."

The gathered hundies vibrate with laughter. They stand much too close, in their smooth new bodies, and press closer, closer, touching each other, chattering away. MORGAN PILOCKI begins to wad up the book, and Kiss says, "What are you doing? That's mine."

He smiles, brushed a hand against her shoulder. "Of course," he says. "With that costume of yours, you must be a fan? It's wonderful to see you out here. But really, what do you see in this stuff?"

Kiss stands up. Her hands are pushed outwards, supplicating. "I just like what I like," she says.

"I'm not against zombies, you know," he says. "Don't push me into some old-fogey box. It's just...well, you've never read any of the old zombie media: never even heard of George Romero or World War Z. Zombies used to mean something: they were symbols of capitalism and consumerism gone out of control. Now that's gone. They've been denatured—turned into just another way for youth to displace the sexual feelings

that terrify them. I suppose it all serves some function, but someday you'll understand how terribly *boring* all of that is to the rest of us."

Amy pulls on an end of his vest and says, "Come on Morgan, you pushed her off her bench—she was just waiting for Gabe."

A hundie woman says, "God, my children love that book. I don't know. I just don't know. they're so prudish. so conservative. I try to get them to live—try to tell them to at least explore the city. but all they want to do is sit in this garden."

MORGAN PILOCKI throws an arm around Amy, who smiles with the edges of her mouth, and says, "There's plenty of room! We're just talking! Engaging in inter-generational cultural exchange! Isn't that the point of all this?"

A hand grabs at Kiss' sleeve. "What the hell are you thinking! You need to go out there and talk to those friends of yours! People need these books. They shouldn't take books they're not gonna read."

Another says, "I just want to know. What are you thinking? What's the burning going to prove? "

Morgan's cackle presides over the horde of hundies pushing in on Kiss.

And then a hand is pulling her out of the crowd. Kiss watches the crowd trail along behind them, but Amy periodically turns back and waves them off, saying, "Yes...she'll talk to them...don't worry....the police are coming...no...it'll all be...no..."

They're in a bus: it smells humid, earthy. Books are stacked up everywhere. New books, in boxes. Covers with bloody mouths: hundreds upon hundreds of copies of *The Silhouette Of A Heart*. Amy lets her sit on the couch for a long long time, during which she bustles around, carrying boxes and bringing them in and out and talking on the phone

and always her lens-computers are oscillating with light. Finally, Kiss stops shaking, and Amy brings her a towel and some soap and shows her the bathroom. Amy gives her a painkiller pill and some old-person clothes—a black miniskirt, high-heeled boots, and a silvery top that holds together in the back with just a tiny string—and says that this will make her stand out a bit less. Kiss says, "Fuck! My pages? Where did they go?"

And Amy says, "Oh...is that the actual manuscript...?"

The envelope, still webbed-up with tape, is laying in the folds of the couch. "The original," Kiss says.

After looking up at Kiss for a moment, Amy slips the papers out of the envelope and looks down at the smeared words. "I'd seen the electronic file before. But this...it's pretty amazing."

After finishing it, Kiss had only known one place to send it: the name mentioned in the back of *Silhouette*. Gabe emailed her back--his message was full of exclamation points--just a few days after she sent it. He said she was the youngest novelist to put out an original book with the house. That was how she learned that Theresa was older than her.

"You...you're an intern at the publishing house?" Kiss says.

"I'm permanent, as of a few months ago..."

"How did you...?" Kiss has never had a job that gave her a regular paycheck.

"Kept doing my reading and doing online lessons, even after they closed my school. Then a lot of unpaid work. And finally, well, I showed Gabe something--I was very, very lucky." She glances at her phone.

She's still looking over the manuscript. "You can read it, if you want..." Kiss says.



"I actually already did. A week ago." Amy slips the pages back into the envelope.

"Gabe told me to work up some comments for you."

"Comments...?" Kiss says.

Amy puts the manuscript back onto the sill. "Don't worry. We'll work together. Just some structural things. Perhaps rewrite the ending. Maybe work a little on the motivations and back-story. And clarify the worldbuilding. And then, finally, a pass to wrangle some sentence-level issues..."

"When does the money come?" Kiss says. "I have to leave the garden; I need to find somewhere to live."

"Aren't you from somewhere upstate? Your parents..."

"But I can afford a house, can't I?" Kiss says. "The money you're paying me should be enough, right?" Gabe had said he couldn't believe she was so young. The book was so mature. So polished. She was the voice of her generation.

"It won't be so bad," Amy says. "I'll work with you. The whole company is behind you."

"Where do *you* live?"

Amy smiles. "I just closed escrow on a two-bedroom. It's near here, actually." She glances at her phone. "Look, I have to run. Why don't you get changed? Gabe wants to see you after his final panel. I think he's planning on making some sort of announcement."

Kiss hasn't looked at herself since her gang gave her that beating, but it's not as bad as she'd thought it'd be. Still, when the water starts running, she can't tell whether the color that swirls down the drain is primarily makeup, blood, or dirt. But then...by the

time the shower's done, she's unmarked. She looks all over herself. All the bruises are gone. She remembers that pill. What was it? The sun coming through the bathroom window is extra bright; it forms a cloud of color that shocks her eyes. She's dancing up on her heels and she can't help smiling. This must be what it is like to be an old person. Someday she'll be old. She'd never given it much thought, but Kiss had always sort of assumed she'd die by thirty. And then the mood is sanded away. What did Amy mean by edits? Everyone who's read the book has loved it.

When she descends from the van, she feels extra exposed. Wind is touching parts of her that never normally see the outdoors. At the base of the van, an old person looks up from a tent kiosk that's filled with even more copies of *Silhouette*. He glances up at her and Kiss gets shivers—her whole body is about to be eyefucked by this hundie—but then he says, "You must be the author friend that Amy told me about. She said to set you up here with a copy of the book." And he goes back to his phone.

Kiss totters over to the chair and sits. When he hands her the book, his hand brushes against the bare skin of her back, but it doesn't linger. Nor does he stare at her.

"Couldn't get past page five myself, the hundie says. "But I guess you all've gotta read this stuff just to figure out what kinds of books *they*—" His eyes are tracking a young girl who's carrying a box of books out of the large pavilion— "really want."

The large pavilion is half-empty. The spider-robots are collapsing and combining the columns of books. More yellowed and mildewed books are going in, but sometimes the young people just snatch them up and haul them off before the spider robots can even start to sort them.

"Did you hear? All those books are gonna go up in flames. What a way for all this to end...."

Kiss flips through the new copy of *Silhouette*, and feels its new pages—so white—fan out under the pressure of her thumb. She turns to her favorite chapter and reads, *She'd abandoned herself, given up on rescue or propriety. It was almost 3 AM. The only other living person to enter the bar had been rapidly torn apart by a pack of zombie dancers. Isabel was sweating, half-naked, surrounded by silent men and women. She hung onto one zombie: her zombie. The man's skin was feverishly hot and he smelled ever-so-slightly of earth and grass and open air—the smells of the grave. Her probing hands had already felt the abscessed wound on his inner thigh: what had he been doing with the zombie who turned him? She thrust her face to his shoulder and sucked on his neck, waiting, waiting, waiting for the bite to come and fill her up with the zombifying venom. But instead she felt a hand pulling at the neck of her blouse, felt fabric tearing, felt those strong arms turn her and push her down onto the bar. He dragged his fingers down the plane of her bare back, and she gasped as she felt his erection rub against her thighs. She writhed against his unbreakable grip—not to escape, but to reassure herself that escape was impossible. His hands pulled at her underwear, and he let loose a keening moan a second before he entered her...*"Hey are these books new?"

Kiss looks up. The old person manning the kiosk has wandered off somewhere, and now she's looking at a hundie with half her ass hanging out of the legs of a singlet. "These can't really be *new* paper books, can they?"

Kiss says, "Well, I think they're the second or third printing..."

"I haven't seen a new paper book since, well, I must've been 40...I think it was 2018. you remember when they printed all those copies of that all-liquid diet book?"

"This one is good," Kiss says. "You really feel like you're there."

"Yeah? I mean...I really shouldn't—my husbands made me come down here with a truckful of donations—said they wanted to reclaim the garage from my books."

"They'll like it too! All my friends love it!" Kiss says. "It's romantic, but it's also about despair and the struggle to survive."

"Hey, how do you get your skin to look like that?" the hundie says.

"My skin?"

"Yeah, you have that slightly weathered look. Like...I told my gerontologist to leave those little lines around my eyes, but he said the treatment didn't work that way."

Kiss folds her arms. More of her body is exposed than is hidden. But the hundies don't stare at her like they did before. Now it's just a quick glance and then away.

"Well, here, let me buy a copy of this. They can't complain if I just come back with just *one* book."

After that, Kiss starts making eye contact with the passing hundies. Lots of them look down at the book and sneer, but some stop and chat. The book is not hard to sell. When they're around books, the hundies become sad, and lots of them want to talk about other books they once owned. Eventually, Kiss gets up the courage to call out to some of the sneerers, "Well how can you dismiss it without even trying it!"

The hundies are friendly enough. For a little while, Kiss is only willing to shove the books across the edge of the long table, but then she gets a little more comfortable

and starts handing them over. One of them puts a hand on her bare shoulder and she's about to shake him off, but then the hand is gone.

Jad appears when she's just started to get comfortable in these boots and is even a little bit enjoying the dizzying sense of height and movement. He drops a big plastic sack onto the ground and a book spills from its neck. A hundie leans to pick up the book, but Jad hisses, "That's mine."

Then he looks at her and says, "You're even putting on their clothes."

The toes of his black boots are spotless; he's washed them since the other night, when they left crusts of mud on Kiss' body.

Kiss puts her arm around the box. She can upset it between them, but that'll give her just a second. She can't run in these boots! She kicks at one heel with the other, trying to get them off. Nothing sharp on the counter. Not even a pen.

"You were supposed to be gone by now," Jad says.

Kiss cries out, "I'm going to leave! I just...there's one person I need to see..."

She knows enough not to mention contracts. Not around Jad. He's always talking about how the legal-financial system needs to collapse before anyone can get anywhere.

His right hand is a fist. There's a cut between the second and third knuckles.

"We were with you when you wrote that book," he says. "And now you think you're gonna *sell* it to us?"

He's about to take another step toward her, but then the hundie staffer reappears.

"Sorry," he says. "Gabe couldn't find the pavilion. I had to go get him."

Jad and the hundie look each other over. Then Jad picks up his plastic sack, throws it on top of one of the boxes full of copies of *Silhouette* and hefts the whole box.

"Wow," Jad says. "Thanks so much for selling these to me. Everyone's gonna love them!"

Kiss wants to say, no, not those. You liked the book, too, Jad. I know you did! They don't deserve to get burned up like the other books. The hundies might've given it to us, but now it's *ours*.

But when the staffer looks at Kiss, she just nods and says, "Yeah, it's all good, Amy arranged it."

The hundie waits until Jad is out past the trees before saying, "I heard that guy drumming in the square on the first day. He is *terrible*. Cleared out the whole place. Just the same riff, over and over."

With him back, she's free to return to her book...*Other zombies would come right up to her, even touch her with their faces, and then turn away. He'd somehow marked her. For awhile, she dreamed about the possibilities: she'd found well, if not a cure, then at least an amelioration of the zombie plague. She dreamed of a whole city of survivors, each bound in mystical union with a zombie. He followed behind her as she travelled, never helping her--not even offering a hand when she stumbled--but always standing over her: cold, immobile, grey--an eternal audience. And yet, sometimes--often, but not always, at night--he'd come upon her and lay her down and run his lips across her body--his mouth slowly filling up with venom that he'd spit off and to the side in order to avoid infecting her--and then couple frantically with her. She could feel the cool control with which he manipulated her body, and she knew that in his own way, he was struggling to communicate with her...*When Kiss' phone goes off, at first she's confused. Then she remembers. She set an alarm to remind her about Mr. Gardenas' talk. The manuscript is

under her arm. It's damp with sweat and dirt and zombie makeup. She's finally going to meet Mr. Gardenas! His talk is the last one of the day. It's in the caverns of what used to be the book pavilion. Most of the stacks are gone. Even as they file in and sit on their seats, a few young people swoop in and grab the remaining stacks right out from under the wires of the spiderbots. When Kiss sees the shelves floating, empty and still, she gets the shivers. Whatever Jad and the rest are doing doesn't have anything to do with her. She's just here to sign the contracts and leave. The day she decided to write this novel was the day that she grew up. She sits right up at the front, so she's staring at the empty table where the panelists will sit. The audience is sweaty and sighing heavily. A few light up cigarettes and joints; a slight haze hangs over the tent. Kiss fans the air around her face and glares at the person next to her, but he gives her a sexless pat on the knee and turns to track the exit of a young woman wrapped in a bulky poncho. She opens up her copy of *Silhouette* and makes sure that the cover is facing forward—maybe Gabe'll notice and say something!—and starts reading...*her zombie looked up at her with hapless eyes as his fingers crushed the skull of the man who'd asked her for food--the first living human being she'd seen in months. The rest of the man's family already lay dead, ripped open in the first moments of her lover's attack. The zombie was scooping out big handfuls of brain, licking up the goop into his slaverling lips. She settled down into a corner. She remembered from the filling station: they'd be here for a few days while the zombie gorged himself. The smell of blood didn't even make her gag anymore. Her stomach rumbled: it'd been weeks since they'd last run across supplies. Now it'd be even harder. Even if any other people still lived, she'd have to avoid them: the zombie would kill them...it was clear that he had no choice--whatever strange chemistry had allowed him to*

*spare her was not something that could happen again. She'd have to remain out here, by herself, forever. She took out her knife. When she reached the zombie, he glanced toward the knife and then at her eyes. He stopped just for a moment. Gulped down a mouthful, then tightened his bloody lips. She bent down...and cut off a huge haunch of muscle from the kill's stringy calf. She took it off to the corner and started breaking down a chair to use for the fire. She'd cook it, at least. And, at her back, her nameless lover continued to feed...*

Applause. Amy arrives in a pack with the rest of the panelists. Amy assays a wave at Kiss and she waves back. When she sees Gabriel Gardenas--she recognizes his face from online photos--she closes her book. Gabe's bare chest glistens with sweat. He runs his nails along the lines of his abdominal muscles and smiles out of the corner of his mouth at the crowd. She's oddly disappointed: Gabe is one of *them*. And, to Kiss' dismay, Morgan also comes and sits up there. He explains that he's a last-minute addition: he'll be moderating the panel on whether they can expect a resurgence of the novel. During the ensuing talk, Kiss rocks her knees up and down. Her manuscript is hot in her lap. Several times she catches Amy's eyes, and each time Amy smiles out of the corner of her mouth. But eventually Kiss becomes a little confused. She opens her book, looks for Gabe's name. This is the same man, isn't he? Because every time he mentions *Silhouette*, it's with a smile. And the audience catches on: when he says the name, they laugh. And Morgan keeps bringing the conversation around to the book.

Responding to some question, Gabe says, "...well, you know, we initially just printed a few hundred copies of *Silhouette*"--he glances at Amy--"as a sort of hobby project to go alongside our reprints of classic horror novels. No one was more surprised than me when it took off..."



Morgan: "But you still had to select it didn't you? You fished it out of the slush pile?"

Gabe says, "Well, no. Not really. I mean, we still get submissions--we've gotten them for years--but it's not our policy to read them. It's all due to Amy. She just happened to read this one and well...we took a chance..."

A cackle from Morgan. "Yes, you're part of its target demo, aren't you? Tell me, what do you *see* in that dreck?"

Kiss clamps her palm down on the manuscript. Something strange is happening. Gabe leans over, narrows his eyes, smiles at Amy.

Amy's lower lip pulls back, showing her bottom teeth. "Well, err, the book has a certain energy to it. I thought it could appeal to young people who--"

Morgan says, "Hey, don't try to make me out as some kind of old fogey. I like sex. I like zombies. It's just...the flat characterization, the awful writing, the absurd plot. And even beyond that, what is it *saying*? The zombie *rapes* her. And there's nothing consensual about the ensuing relationship. He follows her, kills the other men they come cross, refuses to empower her, watches while she starves--"

Kiss is standing. "It's not rape!" she shouts. "It's..." her fingers are moving in front of her, as if she's trying to pull the answer out of a well "...it's...he can't talk. He's already dead. Everyone's going to die...it's...it has to be that way..."

A palm slaps against the table. "Hold your questions until the end," Morgan says. Then he looks closer at her. "Aha...zombie girl...you changed clothes..."

Amy tamps her down with a palm. Kiss slowly sits.

"But she's right," Amy says. "There's...if you look at it from the eyes of someone who's maybe never read a book before--maybe never connected with the written word--someone didn't keep going to school after it ended, then I can see how maybe it would seem like a good book..."

The audience starts to jeer. They're leaning forward. Kiss can feel herself pulled in with them. They want something from Amy.

Morgan's hands are floating just above the desk. "But you don't like it yourself?"

The tips of Amy's lips open up. She's looking helplessly at Kiss. "Whenever I try to reread it, I cringe," she says. "The writing isn't very strong. And the characterization...I don't see why she doesn't just leave the zombie behind--tie him down, abandon him, kill him, do something. If you think about it for three seconds, it all falls apart."

"It's an idiot plot," Morgan says. "And it's turning the next generation into idiots! Teaching them to be passive and dependent! The view of gender roles alone--"

"It's just an entrypt, though. They'll go on from--"

"--Oh, that's bull. You really think they'll go from zombie sex to--"

"--Please, Morgan. Let me finish. Yes, you know, just last week, I uploaded something from our back-catalogue: a book that hasn't seen a new edition in 40 years. A really exciting story that's in dialogue with *Silhouette*--a story that's been testing very well, in fact. It's about a woman who escapes a plague and finds respite in the home of a wealthy man who falls in love with her and offers to take care of her, but, there's a sternness, a moral rectitude to Jane. When she discovers the dark side of his nature, she flees from him. Now this is a book that would be nowhere without *Silhouette* to prepare the ground for--"

Morgan has been guffawing all through this. "Is this *Jane Eyre*?"

The audience starts to laugh. Kiss feels them shifting around in their seats. Above, the spider robots are still; their wires are empty. Amy looks over, blinking twice. "Yes. I understand it used to be fairly--"

"You kids...Next thing you're gonna tell me that you've just invented sex," he says. "Hey. He calls out. Show of hands. How many of you donated a copy of *Jane Eyre* today...?"

Dozens of hands go up. The laughter gets louder.

Amy is looking around. Her mouth opens and closes.

Gabe tries to intervene: "That's...That's...really not material. If I understand Amy right, she was merely exploring the possibility of....We're talking about reissuing...a new cover...new audience."

"You gonna put a zombie on the cover of *Jane Eyre*? Come on now! This is exactly what I'm talking about! No offense," he reaches out and touches the top of Amy's still hand, "but you've still got a lot of reading to do."

The audience is rocking with laughter now. Kiss looks around them. Amy has a smile frozen on her face. They're all focused forward. Morgan tears off into a long speech about literature being dumbed down, but he peppers it with asides directed at Amy, who is smiling at nothing. The manuscript is all creased up in Kiss' lap. Those hundies with their shiny-smooth faces, smiling in perfect crescents, sweat beading on their foreheads and bare torsos...even though they're damp with excitement, they still smell so clean. Their feet stamp the grass until it's flat. Video-banners hang from the ceiling, announcing that the Book Festival has achieved a record number of donations. But no one cares about

any of this. Whenever there's a noise at the entrance to the pavilion, half the heads turn around: they're waiting for the burning to start. Kiss is dying; she wants it all to be over. The panel discussion is going on and on, interminably, full of jokey asides and references to books that she's never even heard of. Amy has settled back into her chair. She looks back and forth between Gabe and Morgan, and, with the flutter of a hand, does her best to evade Morgan's attempts to draw her in further. Kiss doesn't want to look at her anymore. Amy is trapped. Who knows if Gabe will ever die? Kiss opens her book and holds it down by her lap, where it's hidden by the row of seats just ahead. She's almost to the end. She shivers, preemptively, when she reads: *As he crept back into her bed, her stomach rumbled. Isabel could feel each of her ribs; she hadn't eaten anything in four days. Ever since that first day, he'd made all his kills at night, far away. As he fitted himself to her, he rubbed his mouth against hers. She tasted his lips. They were wet with human blood. She sucked on his lips until they stopped tasting of iron. But then her stomach growled again. He was pulling down her jeans, spreading her legs. She kissed him frantically. As always, his lips remained tightly shut. She could feel the venom bubbling up in the sides of his throat and jaw: he was producing enough to make a hundred zombies. And she could feel him swallowing it back down. As always, he refused to let even a drop of it touch her. She ran a hand across the side of his face. There was something there, behind those eyes. Something lay on the other side of zombiedom. She made the decision in an instant. With her tongue and mouth, she probed at his, trying to force open his lips, to force him to let his venom fall on her. He was inside her now, rubbing up on her, and a moan escaped the back of her throat. She felt his teeth for a moment, but then his lips shut. He pulled his head back, shaking slightly, but she followed him upwards, grabbing*

*his head, grabbing his jaw, trying to force him open, and then both her arms were pinned down to the ground, and she writhed under the force of his passion. She made one final effort to spring upwards and bite through his lip, tear it off, suck the venom out of him, so they could be together forever...she didn't want to die! But he caught her around the throat and pushed her down. His mouth opened. The gurgling whine sounded almost like the words "No...won't..." His eyes, green and murky like the sea, were full of what could never be said. He wiped the venom away from his mouth with the back of his hand and then bent down to run his lips along her neck. This, then would be her fate. To forage alongside him, avoiding civilization, growing steadily weaker, until finally she wasted away next to him. Would he then consume the skin and bones that were left? Was that the only way she'd become a part of him? She stared up: the hundred thousand stars were circumscribed by a row of unblinking eyes--a forest of zombies staring down at them. She gasped and allowed his passion to consume her...*when she turns the last page, Kiss just stares at the book. A woman wrote this. It actually came from somewhere. She can feel the nameless zombie looking down on her, full of unspoken, unspeakable longing. And up on stage, Gabe and Morgan and Amy are still talking. What does any of this have to do with anything? *Silhouette* is the only thing in this garden that is real. The hundies are shifting in their seats. Eyes light up as lens-computers activate. No one cares about this panel. And then they all rise, as if the current inside them has been switched on. Their eyes glow brighter. Morgan tries to continue talking, but the words congeal in his throat. The room is emptying. Kiss rises up, pulled to the entrance of the pavilion. The police are already there, with their batons and stun-rods and armored transports. But everyone is simply milling around. The mass of glowing eyes fan out across the darkened garden.

And people keep telling the police that they smell smoke, but the police shrug and say nothing's going on.

A hand touches Kiss on the shoulder. Amy is standing next to Gabe. "Here she is," Amy says. "I told you she was around."

Gabe embraces her: "Ahh." He yells, to everyone who's still listening, "Meet our newest author! Only our second in the last decade and the youngest to come out of our house in fifty years! Karen DeLisle! She wrote her book right here!"

A scattering of applause. Kiss feels this sick, awful feeling in her stomach. She'd do anything to get him to stop talking about her.

"You're one of the good ones!" Gabe says. "It's wonderful to finally meet you. You know...it's a shame it has to be. What do you think of all this stuff that's going on? It's horrifying. Just horrifying..."

Gabe's eyes are focused on the faint lights that waver beyond the trees. For a moment, she can feel the heat of the bonfires against her face. Somewhere out there, Jad must be burning those copies of *Silhouette*. And when her book comes out, they'll burn those too.

"They don't understand," Kiss says. "Without books, we're just--" Her hands form themselves into fists and then flatten out again. "--we're just dead. They're all dead." Kiss feels a surge of power run along her arms, just like when the holy fire came down and gave her that novel. "And because of that, none of them are *ever* going to leave here."

"There you are, zombie girl!" Morgan is by her ear. "You have to take us out there! This is a travesty! We can all *smell* the fucking smoke."

And then the night is alive with blue glows. They're pressed around her, cheering, calling out for her to show them, make them see reason. Her body is in the spotlight formed by the shining of a thousand eyes. Amy turns her head, scratches the back of her neck, then she's fallen behind the crowd. Kiss is leading an army. She staggers, trying to walk in the heels, but they don't overtake her. She expects them to be stumbly and inexperienced and loud, the way she was when she first came into the forest, but they barely make a sound. In a hundred or more years of life, they must've all--at some point--spent time in the forest. When she leaves here, the forest will no longer be her life--it will just be an episode. They laugh and jostle with each other. At one point, Kiss stumbles over a hundie couple who's bedded down in the dark. Excited voices bubble out of the crowd:

"Told Martin about the burning; he's headed over to take a look."

"Police are massing up on 5th Avenue."

"Mayor's wanted to take back the garden for years."

And as they approach, they can hear the shouts and the beating of drums and a hundred wavery flickers of light. And they will crash into the meadow and shake her gang out of their timelessness and force them to see that something is happening--she is actually doing something.

Kiss is the first to come through the tree-cover and into the meadow.

She is the first to see the dome.

Almost thirty feet high, with light spilling from thousands of crevices and gaps. There's a gasp from behind her, and then the meadow is packed with hundies. The dome is made of books. They're stacked up on each other like masonry bricks and held in place

with lengths of wire. She walks up to it, and touches the covers: old leather books with the letters faded away; glossy plastic; paperbacks that look as if they're slowly condensing under the pressure. She tries to glance through the slots, but catches only glimpses of figures moving within some interior space. The sound of drums overpowers any voices. No one is burning anything. As more and more hundies enter the meadow, she circles around the dome. There is no entrance. They've walled themselves inside. She wants to yell at them, but they wouldn't be able to hear her. To them, she no longer exists. Along the base of one side of the dome, she sees a dozen bloody maws, already getting soppy with dew from the grass.

The hundies stand apart from each other. They do not smile or speak. Their hands are low by their sides. Their lens-computers glow brighter. And for a few moments, there are bright flashes of light as they take pictures. But then even that dies away. They're still and quiet. Finally, there's an invisible turning point, and the pressure in the meadow grows less: the hundies are slipping away. The sound of the crickets fills up the space between footsteps.

Kiss sees Gabe. He's walking the path with his head down. She falls in beside him and, after a moment, he says, "Ahh yes, well...it's good that they...not the best use of books...but...it's a joke. A prank. Anyway," he issues a long sigh. "I was most impressed by your book. We think people--particularly those of your generation..." He keeps looking behind him, at the dome. "...people who perhaps aren't used to reading many books--are going to enjoy it a tremendous amount. I understand that Amy has finally gotten the contracts drafted. Why don't you go inspect them in the..."

He trails off. Then restarts, "...someone should really talk to them..."



Kiss leaves him behind. Amy's bus is where she left it. Her whole body is filled with energy. She needs to get to somewhere safe and private. Her mother's house, if nowhere else. She can feel the holy fire coming upon her again. She'd known that she was special, but she hadn't realized how awful and bankrupt the hundies were. They do not exist. No one does. If she doesn't midwife the new world, then it will die, stillborn, and be laid out cold and blue in some icy crypt. She will have to do it all. She ransacks all the closets and dressers, pulling out shelves and putting boxes of books on the ground. She doesn't want to be in this in-between place for another moment. And, then finally, in a blue box, she comes across the mass of contracts. But as she picks them up, her eyes catch something else. The name "Theresa Hall" printed on a slip of paper: a royalty statement. The amount of money that *Silhouette* has made is staggering. And there, at the bottom of the paper, she finds another name: Amy Blumeyer.

She reads through the document twice. And then a third time. Theresa Hall is a pen-name. Amy wrote *The Silhouette Of A Heart*.

The delicate structure that had been building inside Kiss starts to waver. After a long moment, she finds herself sitting down, holding the envelope of her own manuscript. Her hands don't want to obey her, but she tells herself that zombies always do what they must. The first page of her manuscript slides up and she reads *I come to my senses while holding the half-eaten arm of my lover. I spit a stream of venom off to the side and stand up, over the wasted body of Christabel, my now-deceased lady-love, and realize that I must resist the infernal hungers that had silenced and enslaved me, and that I now and forevermore must devote myself to living the best and truest and freest life that I am able. My first step would be to attempt in some way to commun--*Kiss can't read anymore.

Her manuscript was awful. The holy fire had lied to her.

She found her old clothes balled up in a corner and changed out of the hundie clothes. In the bathroom, she reapplied her makeup and smeared the red ink all across her teeth and face. Her face went slack and her eyes stopped blinking. Right before she left the bus, she looked back, emitted a groan, and then signed the contracts she'd found. As she plodded through the gardens, a spider robot collapsed the big pavilion and pulled up its shimmery white corners into a tight bundle. The benches and tables picked themselves up on their legs and marched in orderly rows towards the front gate. She fell in with them, timing her own steps to match the pounding of wood and metal against the pavement.

### **Curriculum Vitae**

Rahul Kanakia is a writer who has sold stories to *Clarkesworld*, *the Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *Apex*, *Nature*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. He graduated from Stanford in 2008 with a B.A. in Economics and is currently a student in the MFA program in creative writing at the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. He used to work as an international development consultant. If you want to know more about him then please visit his website at <http://www.blotter-paper.com> or follow him on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/rahkan>